



Malta

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

MALTA

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country is an archipelago, consisting of three occupied islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and has an area of 122 square miles. Its population is approximately 400,000. The overwhelming majority of citizens (approximately 95 percent) are Roman Catholic, and approximately 63 percent attend services regularly. Most of the country's political leaders are practicing Roman Catholics. The country joined the European Union in 2004, and the Maltese government supported the failed effort to include a reference to "Europe's Christian heritage" in the European Constitution.

Most congregants at the local Protestant churches are not Maltese but rather some of the many British retirees who live in the country and vacationers from many other nations. Of the Protestant churches in the country, the Church of England has a congregation of about 350 members; the united congregations of the Presbyterian and Methodist Church number 120 and the Evangelical Church of Germany has approximately 145 members. There is also a union of 16 groups of Evangelical churches with approximately 500 members in all, which include the Pentecostal and other non-denominational churches. There are approximately 680 Jehovah's Witnesses, 108 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and 30 members of the Bible Baptist Church. There is a Jewish congregation with approximately 120 members. Zen Buddhism has approximately 10 members and the Baha'i Faith also has approximately 30 members. There is one Muslim mosque and a Muslim primary school. Of the estimated 3,000 Muslims in the country, approximately 2,250 are foreigners, 600 are naturalized citizens, and 150 are native-born citizens.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and declares that the authorities of the Catholic Church have "the authority to teach which principles are right and which are wrong." Divorce is not available in the country. However, the state generally recognizes divorces from individuals domiciled abroad who have undergone divorce proceedings in a competent court. The Government and the Catholic Church participate in a foundation which finances Catholic schools, where tuition is free. The foundation was established in 1991 as a result of the transfer from the Church to the State of properties not set aside for pastoral use under the 1991 Ecclesiastical Entities Act. The Government subsidizes children living in church-sponsored residential homes. There is one Muslim private school; work on a projected 500-grave Muslim cemetery did not begin during the period covered by this report.

There are six religious holy days that are considered to be national holidays: The Motherhood of Our Lady, St. Paul's Shipwreck, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the Assumption, and Christmas Day. These holidays do not affect any religious groups negatively.

Since 1991, all churches have had similar legal rights. Religious organizations can own property such as buildings, and their ministers can perform marriages and other functions. While religious instruction in Catholicism is compulsory in all state schools, the Constitution establishes the right not to receive this instruction if the student (or guardian, in the case of a minor) objects, and this right is respected in practice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The Roman Catholic Church makes its presence and its influence felt in everyday life. However, non-Catholics, including converts from Catholicism, do not face legal or societal discrimination, and relations between the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations generally are characterized by respect and cooperation. Proselytism by practitioners of non-Catholic faiths is conducted freely and openly. To promote tolerance, school curricula include studies in human rights, ethnic relations, and cultural diversity as a part of values education for students. There were no reported cases of anti-Semitic incidents during the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy advocates continued observance of basic human rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Both the Embassy's private discussions with government officials and its informational programs for the public consistently emphasize these points.

Through a variety of public affairs programs, the Embassy continued to work with different sectors of society, including religious groups, to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. Among the Embassy's initiatives during the period covered by this report was to host an Iftar to celebrate Ramadan for resident Muslim diplomats and community leaders, and increased outreach to the local chapter of the World Islamic Call Society, as well as a luncheon at the time of Passover for members of the Jewish community in the country.

Released on November 8, 2005

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